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ABSTRACT

Considering that the lower ability student in the seventh and eighth grades faces problems of emotion, identity, and self-motivation, there is a need for a more activity-based, exploratory curriculum that gives students responsibility for their learning and living. An interdisciplinary local studies approach was adopted for this six-week unit called "Our Town: Terre Haute," which allows time for current geography and map study of governmental and volunteer services, and for student discovery and discussion about the community today. The plan of study includes field trips, guest speakers, interviews, and projects. The report discusses the conceptualization and the planning of the unit's content, schedule, activities, projects, and objectives. Anecdotes of students' experiences and an annotated bibliography are included. (KWL)

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Local Studies for the Slower Learner: The "Our Town" Experience

Presented at the Spring Conference
of the Indiana Council for the Social Studies

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Local Studies for the Slower Learner: The "Our Town" Experience

We knew we had a problem.

Our lower-ability seventh and eighth graders were entering a language arts program that was designed for lower ability children; the teachers had taken care to select appropriate reading materials and writing activities; an experienced staff was sympathetic to the unsettled complications that toss and mangle the emotions and identities of children of this age.

But we had a problem.

Despite our curricular care and professional concern, the slower learners who were not self-motivated continued apathetic, frustrated, and sometimes resistant. Their limited skills buffered them from the empathy that most people experience as they read a good story. School was slow, remote, and non-participatory. What was worse, the social maturity that our school expected the seventh graders to develop came slowly, almost grudgingly. For these students, learning and living were things that were done to them. With no control, no ownership of their own, they felt no responsibility.

And that was our problem.

A meeting with university colleagues and several staff meetings encouraged the design of a more activity-based, exploratory curriculum, one with immediacy and proximity to the needs of these adolescents. The staff had a history of interdisciplinary teaching and humanities specialties, so it was reasonable that local studies should appeal to the planners of

the "Our Town: Terre Haute" unit. Given the student needs, our first precaution was to avoid making the study a history-only approach; if the study dwelt on old writers, old buildings, old mayors and old villains, little immediacy would exist. The six weeks set aside for the unit should allow some time for current geography and map study, for inquiry into local business and industry, for study of governmental and volunteer services, and for student discovery and discussion about the town today. Such a plan meant field trips, guest speakers, interviews and projects. Since the school schedule would not accommodate teaming with teachers in other disciplines, the language arts staff had some learning to do. Fortunately a bank of scholarship and experience can be found in professional literature.

The Literature and Guides to Teaching Local Studies

Local studies units are far from being recent or isolated components in the schools. Teachers, parents, humanities and social studies experts have all brimmed with enthusiasm over the success of local studies in the schools. Among the accolades frequently cited are claims that a good local studies curriculum

- *Meets objectives for many parts of the social studies curriculum
- *Includes practical applications; survival skills
- *Emphasizes learning by doing
- *Introduces students to primary and close secondary sources
- *Promotes the student's sense of belonging and participating in his community
- *Brings the student into positive contact with adults and senior citizens
- *Initiates open-ended exploration
- *Encourages problem-solving techniques

Crowned with such praise, local studies would seem to deserve

attention in every school's curriculum. Such a thing has not happened, for local studies is well-loved but ...suspect. Many of the hesitations below imply legitimate curricular concerns, while others may reflect some professional lassitude.

*Many teachers feel that "there is too much to cover" already.
*Local studies has not been "written-into" the curriculum.
*Local studies has often been the avocation of enthusiasts, glorifiers, nostalgists and dilettantes.
*There is no "packaged" curriculum, no textbook.
*Local studies often lends itself to the acquisition of trivia.
*Teachers are often not trained to use community resources.
*Local studies requires the teaching staff to give extra time and energy.

Are there, then, that many schools that brave the dangers and shoulder the work inherent in local studies? Did the 1970's wave of exploratory learning wash out on the beach of book-bound basics? Research indicates that local studies is still aswim between the crests.

When Metcalf and Downey wrote their summary of local studies activities across the nation in 1977, there had been a flurry of projects. An ERIC search of items catalogued from 1977 to the present produced 368 citations, the majority of which concern local history in the schools. About fifty of these items contain specific curricular advice: some are complete unit guides, some summarize "how-to-do" steps, others describe how teacher education was achieved through workshops and grants. Although none of these articles were directed toward teaching slower learners, most advocated experiential approaches. This paper concludes with an annotated bibliography of major sources and a general source list. Not only do the major sources provide

direction, but they also lend inspiration: excellent learning and teaching flow from their pages.

No matter how useful the literature of local studies may be, the curriculum for any one locale requires days of planning and the acquisition of a base of knowledge.

The "Our Town: Terre Haute" Experience

Since educational units begin with the planners, this section will first describe the activities of the teachers and then record some experiences of the students as their study progressed. Each of the three teachers had lived or worked in Terre Haute for eighteen years or more, a sum of experience that was to be valuable throughout the planning. The first meetings were brainstorming sessions. What aspects of the city today and the past should we address? Where can we take students? What and who are our resources? What skills, attitudes, concepts should the students develop? From these meetings came several working lists. More importantly, the ideas generated many objectives that were rendered into the principal goals of the "Our Town" unit, some of which were directed toward measurable skills and others which addressed attitudes and social perceptions.

1. Students shall learn an abbreviated history of their town.
2. Students shall develop an understanding of economic growth and decline.
3. Students shall learn the relationships among city services, taxation, and community service organizations.
4. Students shall learn to use resources for local information.
5. Students shall develop their ability to locate regions, streets, and buildings within the town.
6. Students shall apply comparative observations while

studying local architecture.

7. Students shall learn the names and works of major literary citizens.
8. Students shall acquire biographical information about the town's renown citizens.
9. Students shall explore one aspect of the unit in greater depth by completing individual or team projects.
10. Students shall improve the major study skills of listening, note taking, and conducting interviews.
11. Students shall develop a participatory attitude toward their community, including the belief that they can effect positive change.

The other lists compiled from the brainstorming suggested a need to divide duties among teachers. One teacher volunteered to write a "Brief History," one which students -- with classroom help -- could study in two or three days. The other teachers divided contacts: tours to be conducted, guests to invite, films to schedule. Skills lessons were developed so that students would learn and practice listening, note taking, interviewing and using the public library. From all of the early meetings came ideas to be included in a "Student Project List," a list of suggested, but not exclusive, projects which one or two students could pursue. Innumerable details became the responsibility of the entire teaching team: oversized maps of the town were collected from the area planning commission; puzzles and worksheets on employment and local industry were developed; promotional materials from the Chamber of Commerce were secured for classroom displays; slides of buildings were selected for an introduction to architecture. The school's central location made all of the activities easier to plan since we were near to the public library, the downtown district, the university and three museums.

At last, the team of teachers could set a schedule for the six weeks, albeit a schedule subject to adjustments and incongruities.

(The mayor couldn't visit until week six; the 86 year old interviewee was on vacation in Los Angeles.) The resultant schedule allowed two weeks to introduce students to needed skills (interviewing, map reading, etc.) and to provide a historical and geographical base. The subsequent weeks' studies would concentrate on 1) jobs and the economy, 2) literature and architecture, 3) local care and service agencies. The final week was reserved for schedule overruns and student project completion.

The content of the above may sound entirely too ambitious for slower learners, but the approach to the material was based upon an understanding of the students' limits. It is always easy to assume, whether we assume as adults, as educated people, as experienced people, or as --from good fortune -- more gifted or more privileged people. The three teachers of the "Our Town" unit understood that it may be wrong to assume that average and slower junior high students...

*Can read a local map
*Can recognize local landmarks
*Have been to familiar local sites
*Can use a telephone for information gathering
*Can locate needed information in a phone directory, a local newspaper, or the local library
*Have the confidence to interview adults
*Have adequate listening skills
*Have confidence in their parents as a source of knowledge
*Are accustomed to using their sight for noticing and comparing details.

Some of the difficulties students would experience were apparent as soon as they were asked to show a small group the location of their house or apartment on a large map of the area. Several students were quick to find a section and street; a few, however, did not know to find focal points. The darker lines marking

major thoroughfares, the crooked swath of the Wabash River, the open spaces for city parks were just part of a confusing jumble of lines and boxes to these few students. Our first lessons, then, emphasized directional bearings. Later, students had to use the maps to locate local landmarks, major businesses, city subdivisions.

A survey of student opinions and experiences in the city produced other foils for assumptions. Although our school is less than a block away from it, the Eugene V. Debs House and National Museum was unknown to all but 15% of the students. Later when we took the students there, the artist who painted extensive murals in the loft of the house talked to the students about Debs and about the process of painting such a large canvas.

The teachers designed some study sheets so that students would have to talk to parents or other adults to find answers. Several students expressed a distrust of their parents to help them with school. One should not conclude that these were altogether unfortunate family situations; after all, twelve and thirteen year olds generally suffer through a time in which their parents grow terribly obtuse and uncooperative. Despite this initial attitude, students found that mom or dad <u>could</u> tell them where a once-notable building stood or what company produces polyethylene or when the high schools were consolidated. Many days during the unit started with eager comments of "My Dad told me ..." or "Grandmother said she used to...." Dialogues were opening.

The easiest assumption to make about students this age is

that they are accustomed to using their sight for noticing and comparing details. The architectural study of week four was less a historical and disciplinary study than it was a series of lessons on "how-to-look-at" buildings. The slides chosen for the students included many buildings within the school district and many others within close walking distance. The slide presentation was not a lecture; architectural periods and building styles were omitted, and simpler terms for description were substituted. A series of questions from the teacher generated student comments and a pattern for looking and comparing. "What is strange about this roof?" "How are these windows different from the ones before?" "What materials were used for this wall?" "What decorations do you see?" Gradually, students acquired a small vocabulary and a system for analysis. The subsequent walking tours highlighted four buildings: one residential, one civic, one religious and one commercial. As students filled in observation sheets, they added to their vocabulary. Students who first saw nothing except size, color and material, eventually were seeing crowned windows, brackets and scrolls, dentils and clay-tiled roofs. Several of the children had even begun calling "those big round poles" columns.

Much of the student experience of the "Our Town" unit centered on project work. During the first weeks teachers tried to introduce possible project topics, either by reference to portions of the history study or by reference to the list of suggested topics. Students had to submit a project proposal in writing to the teacher. The teacher then approved the project and wrote the requirements that had to be met. Students who

failed to submit a proposal were advised and -- if necessary -- assigned a project which they found acceptable. The conduct of projects required a working knowledge of several resources, especially the county history portion of the local library.

Terre Haute is fortunate to have a library with a special collections section abundant in local material. In fact, many libraries already have collections of oral history tapes, files of scrapbooks kept during the last hundred years, photographic collections, genealogies, and vertical files loaded with a miscellany of items. Early contact with library officials is important; in our case, it allowed for students to use tapes and transcripts that were usually restricted, and it also gave reference personnel an early indication of the help they might provide. A reference librarian came to the school and spoke to the students about special resources that would help with projects. At that time students were given floor plans of the library so that locations could be marked. During follow-up visits to the library students began using microform readers for old newspapers and scrapbooks. Whispers of "Hey, look at this!" and "Look at these old advertisements!" were not uncommon. We could tell that the librarians were enjoying the students' discoveries as much as we were.

A few project cases serve to illustrate the variety of activities and the types of skills the students were acquiring.

George was one of the students who could not decide on a project. His academic achievement had been pathetically low throughout school, since he was reading at half his grade level.

Building an architectural model of one historic residence -- the Markle House -- appealed to him, but he and his partner never seemed to get started. At last, one of the teachers asked the two boys if they had their building materials. No, they did not. During lunch that day, the teacher, George and the other boy went to the college bookstore where they bought two large sheets of foam board and plastic film. Each boy supplied fifty cents as his portion. At that point they had an investment. The next week became a boil of activity. During the three days before projects were due, George returned to his English classroom to measure, to cut, to glue and color. He worked from 3:00 till 4:30 on Tuesday and Wednesday, and from 3:00 till 5:15 on Thursday. One day early, he had the most impressive model ready; and, yes, he knew that open house was that night. His other teachers were amazed: George did that? It's incredible! That evening the focal point of the room -- perhaps of the third floor -- was a white, two - story model with dark green shutters and a columned portico.

Angie and Michelle were average-ability students who wanted to do an interview and story about the welfare department. Their first attempts were frustrated; the right person to talk to was never in. Finally, they had an appointment with the director of the department, and armed with questions and a tape recorder, they invaded his office. The result, an enlightening thirty-five minute tape, was a worthwhile product in itself, but the girls were determined to transcribe it. Most adults know what the girls did not first realize: we say a lot of words in thirty-five minutes. Michelle wrote and wrote and Angie wrote and wrote. Then they re-read, putting in punctuation and capitals. By the

time they had finished, they had learned much more than the services and problems of welfare.

Kay did not have a project. Of everything proposed to her, the city parks sounded most interesting. But when she was told that she would have to talk to the park superintendent's office, Kay exploded with refusals. "They'll laugh at me!" she insisted. Kay had been laughed at so many times by peers and adults that her reaction was understandable. The teacher bargained until Kay and her partner agreed to talk on the phone to the park office, if the teacher began the conversation. He asked the girls to find the phone number. After trying "parks" and "superin-sumpthin-or-other," they declared that the number wasn't in the book. Questioning produced the reference key, "Terre Haute -- City of," and the teacher made the initial introduction, at last leaving Kay on the phone to take names and sizes of the various parks. When the teacher returned to the office, Kay was repeating the last three parks to her partner who recorded them. Kay twice asked the interviewee to "repeat that and could you spell that, please." She was smiling. After hanging up, she jolted to attention and said, "Oh, no! I forgot to tell that lady thank you. Should I call her back?" This time she found the number herself and made the most of courtesy. (So many students had difficulty finding services and phone numbers that the teachers added a separate lesson on using the local directory.)

Anecdotes only go so far in measuring the success of a program. It is fair to say that the "Our Town" unit also had a few failures. Several students left projects unfinished, less

from a lack of interest than a shortage of time. The teachers had planned so many activities (including regular spelling lessons) that sustained project work was difficult. Some speakers were well-informed but far from effective with children. And some areas were covered inadequately, specifically industry and local health care. Those failures, however, pale beside the successes, and the staff had already begun to examine improvements for the next year.

The "Our Town" experience and the experiences described in local studies literature suggest several practical steps for conducting local studies in any community. Newcomers should first explore the major sources. From there, to make the most of a local studies unit:

1. Brainstorm with other teachers and interested parties concerning -
   A. Local resources (people, institutions, materials)
   B. Themes for emphases
   C. Expertise of teaching staff
2. Limit planning to agreed topics or themes for curriculum
3. Organize staff development (summer meetings or in-service days)
4. Write curricular objectives, outline, activities, and resources
5. Schedule, reschedule, and coordinate non-classroom activities
6. Involve parents, local government, other agencies and the media
7. Practice skills -- interviewing, researching, notetaking
8. Develop a variety of project suggestions to appeal to a wide range of students
9. Showcase student work
10. Include problem solving opportunities
11. Take calculated risks
12. Evaluate.

If one thing convinces the teachers of "Our Town" that this is worthwhile education, that one thing is citizenship. The divorced, isolated, apathetic students of years past became responsible contributors. This year's class matured with surprising

speed and -- we can now say -- grace. Their exploration and their continued interest in the community may signal a lifetime of involvement.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

*Major Sources on general approaches to local studies:

Beery, R. and Schug, Mark C., ed., Community Study: Applications and Opportunities. Washington D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1984.

Bulletin No. 73 from NCSS contains seven practical articles, several of which explain the development of participatory citizenship. The editors introduce the volume with a well-grounded rationale including a correlation of objectives with the skills components of "The Essential Social Studies." Other articles focus on local economics, community service projects, visual arts as a local barometer, and implications for the global community.

Downey, Matthew T. and Metcalf, Fay D., Teaching Local History: Trends, Tips, and Resources. Boulder: Social Science Education Consortium, 1977.
(Available from ERIC, ED 151 237)

This survey and study collects the activities of schools across the nation that have implemented local history studies in some form. The authors provide guidance in that they delineate the responsibilities of the teacher and they provide cautions concerning common mistakes. Sections concentrate on social and ethnic history, economic history, family history, local architecture, folklore and cultural journalism, and a summary of local resources.

Downey, Matthew T. and Metcalf, Fay D., Using Local History in the Classroom.

Following their 1977 study (above), the authors have sifted through the successful programs to present a "how-to-do" guide. This volume is more pragmatic, then, and it is illustrated with sample survey forms, architecture recording sheets, sample student guides, and appendices for library use, for cemetery data and for walking tours.

Weitzman, David., Underfoot: An Everyday Guide to Exploring the American Past. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976.

Written for the "historian Everyman," Weitzman's book is not directed toward the schools, but toward the desire of many

Americans to understand their past through the everyday objects - the old photos, the tools, the cemeteries, the glass bottles, the old buildings - familiar to most people. The book is well-illustrated and makes a perfect adult companion to Weitzman's My Backyard History Book for children.

Wigginton, Eliot, Moments: The Foxfire Experiment. Nederland: Institutional Development and Economic Service, Inc. (IDEAS), 1975.

The remarkable success of Wigginton's approach to oral history, folkways, and community-as-curriculum is described in this book--but not without cautions and a candid admission of failures. Eminently useful for planning skills development and student activities, the book reflects on other demanding teacher functions as well: accountability, inspiration, and evaluation.

*General sources with a variety of concentrations

"Block Study: Learning About Your Local Community," Arlington (VA) County Public Schools., ERIC Documents: AN ED 239 956, 1983.

The 55 page document concentrates on the teaching of architecture and social history. The appendices are fine: directions for observational studies beyond the building (pets, lawns, toys, shrubbery) are included. Good bibliography on architectural field guides.

Blumenson, John J-G., Identifying American Architecture, rev.ed., Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1981.

Blumenson presents this field guide in an economical, clear form. It is small enough to slip into a jacket pocket while rambling around town.

Downey, Matthew T. and Metcalf, Fay., "Side Streets." ERIC Documents AN ED 205 453, 1981.

This document explains how teacher education was achieved through five-week summer institutes in Colorado. The authors argue that the involvement of all teachers associated with the new unit will insure commitment and success.

Haugen, Nancy, et. al., "A Guide to Writing Local History," ERIC Documents: AN ED 220 862, 1981.

While this 55 page "how-to" booklet does emphasize collecting and writing, the advice about field work techniques and communication skills is informative for any teacher who leads able students in a local group project.

Interim Reports. Indiana Historic Sites and Structures Inventory., Indiana Department of Natural Resources: 1984 and adjacent years.

These surveys are regional and they have been completed at different times. Each book contains a historical summary and an overview of sectors in the Historic Register. Individual houses are catalogued by style and quality of contribution. Important!

Leon, Warren., "Preparing a Primary Source Package on Your Community's History," Social Education 44 (November 1980): 612-18.

Leon's article is useful for developing themes for collection (youth, poverty, ethnicity, etc.), and the article directs the accumulation of data into source books.

McAlester, Virginia and Lee., A Field Guide to American Houses. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985.

More sophisticated and scholarly than the Blumenson book, this field guide -- although less portable -- serves to clarify transitional styles. The line drawings and photographs are splendid aids to the classification of whole buildings and minor details.

McCain and Nelson., "Resources for Rural Social Studies Teachers," ERIC Documents: AN ED 197 906, 1981.

The appendix is the gem here. Over 100 sources for local studies in rural settings are listed, ranging from county agents to grain elevator companies to farm co-ops.

Mahoney, James., "Local History: Guide for Research and Writing," ERIC Documents: AN ED 206 006, 1981.

As in Foxfire projects, the teacher had a goal of publishing a student-written book of local history and lore. Most applicable is Mahoney's advice on interviewing; he provides 13 categories for questioning, with sample interviews in his appendix. (65 pp)

Minnesota Social History Project., ERIC Documents: AN ED 174 498, 1979.

This project was for able secondary students and it is curricularly sound. One hundred and fifty-five pages from eight newsletters describe the collection and study process.

Schug, Mark C., "Community Study for Social Studies Teachers," Social Studies 74 (November-December 1983): 237-41.

Schug is concerned here with using the local community for teacher education. His argument that community interaction reduces the isolation inherent to teaching is persuasive. The article includes a teacher education model and suggestions for global associations and economic study.

Simpson, Michael L., "Why the Past Comes Last," Indiana Social Studies Quarterly 36 (Autumn 1983): 5-17.

Simpson's article, about the "Backward History" project in the

Franklin School Corporation, carries the reader back to Dewey, back to the motivation and process to ask questions. Simpson reminds us that students' minds "are not upon the subject (textual history) precisely because it does not touch them."

Weitzman, David., My Backyard History Book. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975.

Part of the Brown Paper School Series of the '70's, this book is a student's guide to discovering history in everyday objects. Great illustrations and individual project ideas.

*Three Thin But Handy Periodicals For Hoosiers

Hoosier Heritage., Indianapolis: Indiana Department of Education.

This newsletter includes practical advice on oral history projects, local history, and learning skills. POC: Evelyn M. Sayers, 229 State House.

Indiana History Bulletin.

Indiana Magazine of History.